

Light and The Eyes

TALES,
LEGENDS
AND STORIES
FROM VIETNAM
PAST AND PRESENT



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LIGHT AND THE EYES

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LE HANG

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Vi, a girl of 12, was spoiled by the years spent in a U.S. puppet Orphanage. After the liberation of Saigon in 1975, she came back to her home village and lived with her grandmother. She made acquaintance with a blind liberation fighter

Vi was 12 years of age and as playful as a kitten. She spoiled everything and caused trouble to everybody. Yet, when someone asked her why she had behaved that way, her eyes lowered, and she turned dumb. Her almost stony dumbness made all these people all the more angry. Miss Kim's bookcase was suddenly moved to the kitchen corner and soon made into a heap of rubbish. When asked, Vi winked her eyes, and in spite of reproaches, she stood motionless. At times losing their patience, they slapped her and she kept her eyes wide open. She was considered quite an incorrigible girl. All the family showed their hopelessness at her thickwittedness.

The reason for all that goes back to the time when the war was still raging through the little girl's village, sending the villagers to running wildly to save their skins, and she lost her family's track. Together with other stray children she was put into a refugee's camp where she had lived in a state of a sick dog, and, finally she was sent to a prison-like barbed-wire orphanage. After liberation, she was brought back home, but now she became quite a different child with an incorrigible character. She was capricious, her cropped hair looked sparse and rough, her eyes cold and indifferent. She made a mess of the house all day. Her grandma took pains to ask her to go to school, but when in class, Vi always teased her friends and even stole their school things. Her teacher asked her why she did so, she stood as dumb as a fish. Perhaps she was not always the culprit, but so naughty was she that people asked to examine only her bag.

All the people around thought Vi was spoiled by the orphanage. But when she sat alone, she looked so much tender and sentimental. When given a wrong dressing-down, she wept. She looked at the star-apple tree with its leaves in two colours, the young rice-like light green on one side and the earth-brown on the other, and sang to herself. Caught by the look of others, she stopped singing immediately. And when asked, she kept silent as if she were not hearing it.

For the past few days, from the next-door house of hers resounded the music of an accordion. She curled up like a kitten waiting for the tune coming to her, and then she wished it would have reached the little birds that were chirping in the star-apple tree. The music was really marvellous; sometimes it sounded like the roar of billows sometimes it was like the stream. This made her think of her village which was gulped down in the flame when she had been a little girl, of the fields ploughed up by U.S. bombs and shells. Accompanying that accordion was his deep voice.

Vi felt a little nervous. She didn't know why. Yet she stood up clumsily; tiptoeing to the low wall that separated the two houses. A man was sitting in the verandah. His hair and shoulders were bright with sun light. The accordion with its fine folds and keyboard, harmoniously spread out and immediately drew in under his chest. His eyes seemed to look far away, the eyes of a bird soaring up in the sky.

Vi picked up a pebble and threw it at him. He stopped short. He looked up, and then went on playing his accordion. She had not found any trick to disturb him, so she came back to her room silently. Her grandma had already gone to work and sister Kim was at school. She, therefore, was the queen of the house. She angrily sent the papers on the table

down to the ground and scattered them all over the place, and she kicked and pushed the chairs, and then she looked blankly around the room, .

His harsh and black fingers continued with the wickerwork. Her hands wet with sweat, she raised the basket to look at it and then hid it behind her. Every morning he woke her up with his accordion. She threw stones at him, but he remained motionless. Now she even stole his rattan basket.

After a second look at the basket, Vi stole into the room and hid it under the bed. With her hand pressed hard to her chest to ease the fear, Vi again took the stool to the wall and climbed up on the wall to watch him working peacefully. Once she lost her taste for playing, she pursed her lips, pushing lightly the half-opened gate, and, tiptoeing as a cat, goes close to the front of him. His eyes were deep dark. Vi put her hands on the knees to watch him weaving. To her surprise he kept working on without uttering any words. After a while, he said:

"You're little Vi, aren't you?"

"What! Why do you know my name?"

"All the people around here know you, and I hear your grandma scold you all the time."

"I've got used to her scolding."

Vi said in the manner of a grown-up, then sat down on the rattan chair, swinging her legs. Now the sun was not on his hair only, it covered all over the baskets.

"Do come in and have some cake, and don't do anything to get blamed by your grandma. 'hear me," he said.

Vi walked slowly after him and looked round the house. His mother was said to have gone to Song Be province on business, and he lived here alone.

The room was small but tidy and clean. The chairs, the writing table, the bed, the case, all were of little value, but were put in good order. His house looked poor, but it looked more beautiful than hers. When, she was looking curiously around the house, the soldier walked straight into the kitchen, and he mumbled while walking.

"You seem to be doing a mathematical problem, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm calculating the steps so as to walk more steadily."

Vi again looked around and the mischief began to arouse in her. Vi reached for a pretty thick book the cover of which had turned yellow. Turning its pages, Vi curled her lips and smiled as the book didn't have any pictures and even not any letter in

It: It only had plenty of raised dots. Vi threw it back to its place and sat again on the chair. When the soldier appeared, Vi looked at him, and pursed her lips as she found that he had not paid any notice of her. He looked straight across the door, though he was holding a piece of green-pea cake.

"Take it. Children like this kind of cake."

Vi took the cake and ate heartily, then she put the transparent wrapper on her nose and smelled it.

The ex-serviceman began singing with his warm and sweet voice to the accompaniment of the accordion. Vi drew her chair closer to him so that she might have a good look at the neat folds which were now being pressed together and now drawn apart according to the tune. Vi put her fingers between two folds, and he stopped playing, smiling as her fingers were a little pressed.

"You little naughty girl. No wonder your grandma scolds you all day."

"I like to be scolded," Vi pulled a face.

"Why so?"

"I don't know why, but I like it. When I was at the Orphanage, nobody was scolded, but harshly hit."

"Who hit you?"

"Not a few. Anybody could do, I was awfully hit."

"You must have made much trouble."

"Oh, I was so sad that I wanted to do such bad things."

Vi took another book, yet it had the same raised dots in it.

"What books of yours! All letters are in dots."

"Those are the only one I've got to read."

"You don't know, when you just came back here. Granny told me not to make any trouble or else you'd take me to the District Revolutionary Committee. Then why are you so gentle now?" she asked smiling.

"I've never been harsh!"

"Look! On the first days after you were back, my grandma told me you're a soldier, so we should be careful because you're coming back to observe us. It's funny enough to think of the days before liberation, your mother was really gentle. Grandma told me that in your house there once had been an underground shelter full of V.C. weapons, and your father was arrested and killed. Small wonder that your mother was afraid of the whole village. After liberation, my grandma always followed your grandmother's steps for fear that if your grandmother got

angry, the whole village would be in danger of being revenged. On the contrary, to everyone's surprise, your mother remained as gentle as ever, and the fear of you has been dispelled now."

"What! Why are you speaking like a chatter-box today? You've always been blamed for keeping your mouth shut," he smiled.

"I like it. I like to talk, to talk much. And why do you sing and weave baskets at the same time? What a strange thing!"

"The revolutionary army gave me a chance to follow a music course, and while I'm taking a summer holiday, I don't want to live on my mother, I want to earn some extra-money."

"Who taught you to make such beautiful baskets? It's very funny to see you now weaving baskets now playing the accordion."

"Why funny?"

"Because once you have already known how to play the accordion. why don't you give up making baskets?"

"Not so funny, dear. While you're going to school, you should do something useful. In what form are you now?"

"In the fourth form! I'm always ill, that's why I fell behind my classmates, Except me, some of my

children reach the age of twelve." Vi was a bit ashamed.

"How are you getting on with your studies?"

"Very badly, just the last of the list. Sometimes I was the last but one of the list."

"Not good then!"

"Everyone calls me a 'tomboy' all the time. So why have I to be a good girl?"

"Don't say so. Once blamed, even mistakenly blamed, you must be as good as ever."

"Nobody wants to talk to me as you are doing now. When the grown-ups are having a chat, if I come close to them, they ask me to go away. I tell you, I want to play the accordion very much. Is it difficult?"

"Not very difficult. The problem is that you should be patient. Too much indulgence in your playing rather than in your study will bring about bad results."

"What a beautiful song you have with the musical sounds like the birds flying high, and storms and waves roaring,"

"I'm writing the music."

Vi pointed a finger of hers at him, and her hand dropped right away as she saw that he kept looking calmly through the door."

"You write music, don't you? Why, you are so talented."

"I've been taught to. If you behave well, you'll be much better than I am. You have two arms, two eyes, so you'll work much better than I do."

Vi remained babbling, her playful hands again took up the glass ash-tray. Then finding no interest in it, she put it down. The soldier continued:

"Next month try to study harder and get the highest marks you can so as to please your grandma."

Vi smiled, yet she sank back to sadness right away and bit her lips. She wondered why he didn't smile back to her, on the contrary he turned to look to somewhere. She bit her fingers while keeping a look at him, at his strange eyes. It seemed to her that they always had a far-away look.

He stood up and went into the room.

"Again he was mumbling his calculation. What a strange man!" Vi whispered.

Out of the room, he lighted a match and smoked slowly. He was more careful than her grandma when she threaded the needle.

"Young as you are, why do you walk even more slowly than my grandma does?" she blurted it out.

He smiled, shaking his head lightly and sat down. She covered her mouth with her hand and cried:

"You, why do you drop cigarette ash on the table and burn the table-cloth?"

His face darkened.

"You, a mischievous child. You put my ash-tray in the wrong place. I need order very much. I can't see anything."

Vi was surprised.

"Didn't you see the ash-tray very near to you?"

"No, I didn't."

"What, are you blind?"

Again he nodded. Vi was at a loss.

"Really?"

"Yes, what's the use of telling you lies?"

Still doubtful about that, she moved her little hands here and there.

"It means you can't see anything?"

Vi stood up as though she wanted to rush towards him. She stopped immediately in great amazement, thinking that she had found out an unbelievable thing. She was upset.

"Can you see me? Only in a blur, can you?"

He looked up; his face was so gentle, so was his smile, yet somewhat bitter and unruffled. Vi covered her chest with her hands, just as if she had just been hit.

"No, I can't. But it seems to me that your face is both cunning and pretty."

Vi straightened up herself, but not any inch taller. She felt hard to breathe as her chest got fits of pains. She kept standing dumfounded in the middle of the room, looking intently into his eyes. She found her in his eyes? Through his sun glasses, she knew that his eyes were there, the same as hers but why...

"I think you wear short-sighted glasses."

"No, not that. What's the use of short-sighted glasses for the blind! They're my father's sun glasses. When my father died in a battle against the Yankees, he left them for me, and now I'm using them."

Vi bit a finger of hers and dropped herself on the chair. Both kept silent. Vi was like a cat that had just been drenched with a pail of water. She coiled in an old armchair. Over there in a lane, children from a kindergarten were singing: "I love the liberation fighter who skilfully shot down Yankee planes. If U.S. jets come here, they will bring them down again."

After a few minutes, Vi asked:

"But who did harm to your eyes?"

"It was the pressure of the U.S. bombs that did it. I was wounded many times in the arms and shoulders. But not seriously. Yet the last time when

I was entrenched in an underground shelter, the bomb explosion nearby affected my eyes, making them bleeding. And they have failed to see anything ever since."

Vi kept staring at him with her lips pressed together. It seemed there was some attraction that made her eyes glued to him. His face was a bit square, his hair got loosened a little on one side of the forehead, and his eyes, quite useless now, looked gentle and empty, the eyes that all the time looked closely at certain point in space, and became more gentle that way. Vi earnestly wanted to believe that he was not blind at all.

• "Did you cry when your eyes got hurt?"

He seemed to meditate a moment and his voice was heard a bit more distant.

"Yes, I did. I almost got mad I got treatment at the 'I' Hospital in the jungle. When I knew that I was blind, I fainted. Before that, when I got wounded, I kept quiet and waited for the recovery so as to return to combat. But this time, awakened, I could find darkness only."

"So who calmed you down? You know, when I was at the orphanage, I was grabbed of all my food by the older children, and I cried and cried

without being calmed down by anyone. Where was your mother then?"

"She was here, you know it well, don't you? How could she know about my condition?"

"You kept crying all alone?"

"No, I am a grown-up. I cried only for a little while. All the doctors took care of me and consoled me. Well, I remembered the birds singing. At that time, I was being treated at 'II' Hospital. Sad and disappointed. How could I come back to my fellow combatants with such eyes! Suddenly I heard the birds twittering, and I asked the doctors to give me the accordion so that I could play again (I hardly knew how to play it). Lying in bed and listening to a marching song from a distance, I felt more attached to life and my hope grew stronger with that twittering of the birds. I dreamt of writing songs as powerful as the marching songs echoing from high above the mountain, the songs that prompted all the hearts to aspire to that high hope and to fight without respite all one's life. I played the accordion again and again. I took pains to do that, and at times I felt hopeless and wanted to drop it for good."

He paused with a faint smile. Vi was surprised at his smile, the smile of great confidence, that made his deep dark eyes suddenly lively.

"How can you read and write?"

"I was sent to the Blind Soldiers' School. I learned all over again from the beginning with the help of the braille. Look, here's my notebook."

Vi took the cardboard-like papers which she had just seen. The small dots were Greek to her. She closed his special book. She shut her eyes for fear of seeing him. Tears were running down her cheeks.

"It's impossible for me to understand, Uncle. You can't see anything, but you continue your wicker-work, make rattan chairs, and particularly write music."

He looked up enquiringly,

"Why do you cry?"

Vi's voice was hard to hear as if her nose was stopped. She washed the tears away.

"I can't contain myself. But why do you know that I cried?"

"I heard it. You know, since my blindness, my hearing has got sharper. My memory also lasts longer than before. In the past, I played the accordion badly. Now there are only two years to go before I graduate. I will teach and write music. You know, fighters need music no less than weapons. I will follow my comrades-in-arms with the accordion."

He again pressed the accordion against his chest, and the music again flew out of it, caressing Vi and then fading into the air of the sunlit morning.

Vi's eyes kept glued to his lips which bore a soft and frank smile. When he sang, his face became so lively that she forgot that he was blind. What she knew was only he himself with the accordion, his singing and those soft lips.

After he had played the accordion, Vi curiously looked round the room.

"Who cooks your meals? Your mother has gone on business for a whole month, hasn't she?"

"I do it myself."

"Why don't you let me know from the very beginning?"

"I can't do that if you don't say a word. You're still busy throwing stones at my house, aren't you? However, I've just been back here only a few days, and I heard your grandmother taking you to task all the time."

Vi blushed with shame:

"You don't hate me, do you?"

"If you don't study hard your grandma scolds you. Nobody dislikes you."

Vi looked serious as a grown-up. She wanted to sit quietly to think of him. She looked at him as a

believer looked at her idol. There was something dancing in her chest. She could not understand. What she could see clearly was his calm, and she had a feeling of pressure in her chest. He slowly told her about him, about the days he fought against the enemy and then the days he struggled hard against his wounded eyes. Vi listened to him. His voice was warm and gentle. She wondered why it was she who wanted to be consoled and caressed, not he. Vi held in her hands the books with small dots in them, and then she looked at his gentle face, his smiling lips, his dark complexion, and his eyes, that would have been more beautiful than any other eyes.

Saying nothing, Vi stood up and tiptoed towards the gate. A little while after that she brought back a small rattan basket lined with red flowers, a cardboard box in which she put many small things such as a toy cat, a green brush, a plastic doll, etc.

Vi hesitated a moment before she put all these things into his hands: the rattan basket and the small notebook.

"They are yours. I stole them. And this belongs to little Hanh, that to little Thuy. This afternoon I'll give these things back to them. I will never take anything from other people. Do believe me. I used

to lie in the past, but now I won't do it any more. I mean it. Do take your things. please."

He took all that she gave back to him. He turned up his face. Vi almost cried as she looked at his eyes. She knew that he could not see her. It seemed that he also got so moved that he could not say a word. He took in his hands everything Vi had stolen from her friends. Suddenly he asked her a very strange question:

"What's the colour of the sky today?"

Vi pursed her lips and her voice was almost indistinct.

"It's blue, very blue."

"I give you this basket to hold your toys, and I'll make toys for you. I know how to make them. And this notebook, a friend of mine gave it to me and now I give it to you so that you can write in it the good things you do during the day. And these things should be given back to your friends this afternoon."

Vi nodded, and he smiled while she was crying. Tears were running down on his book with small dots. The dots were dancing before her eyes, looking like thousands of tears. Vi could not have so long a look at his eyes. She wished that he would cry as she did, but he remained seated calmly. Vi stood in amazement before him.

"Why are you so silent, my little friend?"

Vi bit her lips and uttered no words.

His voice was as clear as a streamlet.

"Don't cry!"

Vi took the box and the basket.

"Are you sad?"

"What's the use of being sad, little dear. Life doesn't like those who sit idle and cry. I'm trying to play the accordion and to compose music. I must work too so as not to depend on others. Look at these baskets! It took me almost a year to finish them. The first baskets I made were not so beautiful as these. The first dots in the braille letters at first made me almost mad. I had to remember how many dots these are in letter C in the horizontal and vertical lines. And I had to know to read and write. I almost had to start from the beginning, and even harder than it really is."

Vi put her hand on her mouth to check a sob.

"And I didn't study hard, I didn't want to go to school! My uncle! I'll begin studying hard tomorrow. Do you believe me? I won't do anything bad to my friends."

"I believe you, not tomorrow, but right this afternoon."

Vi nodded, but remembering that he could not see, she said:

"I'll study well and I'll read books to you, to re-write them in braille letters."

"Oh, very good. That's what I strongly wish for. There are many books I can't read if there is no one to help me. Look, I've just copied down more than ten short stories and some books on the history of music."

Vi looked at his long beautiful fingers, as he pressed them on the buttons of the brown accordion.

"Who has tidied the room for you?"

"It's me, of course."

"Then from now on, what you'll do is to read books, weave baskets and play the accordion. It is my work to tidy up the room. I think I won't put your things in the wrong places."

"No. I should do it myself, because if anything is in the wrong place, I may tumble down. You see, you didn't put the ashtray in the right place, and the tablecloth was burnt already! Do sit there. You're really thirsty. I'll bring you something to drink."

He stood up, counted in silence and went into the kitchen. Now Vi thought that he could not make

any wrong calculations. She was admiring every of his steady steps. He slowly poured tea from the teapot. She closed her eyes for quite a long time! Then she stood up and made some steps forward, her hands in the air. She opened her eyes, yet he remained seated there, how gentle was his face! She could not walk a few steps further. She wondered how he worked, studied and walked in the dark for six years! Vi shook her head and looked steadily at him. She covered her eyes with her two hands. Then she opened them. He was still there, sitting calmly in front of her. She felt something heavy in her chest. He was as firm as a rock, and she was relying on that rock.

“My uncle! Don't hate me as some other people do. I have only you to have pity on me. I will study well. I mean it, believe me.”

He stroked her hair -

“I believe you can do that.”

“I often stole things. Were you disappointed about me? You know, I also took your things. I don't know why it was so strange about me. I did so just out of spite. Why did they hate me?”

“No, I didn't. How can I get angry with you? It's good that you won't take anything from others.”

Vi nodded, her tears had dried. Her eyes were crystal clear. On the other side of the lane, little children were learning how to read the alphabet, their voices ringing sweet and gentle. Vi shook his hands.

"I'm going to learn my lesson. I'll be the best in reciting the lesson!"

Vi came to the door. Hesitatingly she turned round as if she found it hard to part with him.

"My uncle! Can you see me?"

He smiled.

"How can I?"

Vi put her fingers on her lips and looked at him. Her smile was radiant with sunlight, and her hair shone brightly too. She tried to put on a serious face and stood beside him. But as such, she felt so little.

"Let me describe you. All right? Oh, how hard it is. You're as tall as the principal of my school. Your hair is pretty and a bit close cut your fingers when they press the accordion's key board look a bit funny. And even your eyes, your eye-lids..."

She paused suddenly, remembering his lost eyes.

She took his hands and shook them. Birds were singing in the star-apple tree. She looked at him. His eyes were bright with the red summer sunshine.

Was it the sunshine or not? Or his tears? "My uncle!" Vi called quietly. His fingers were as trembling as hers.

She wished she could stand beside him for ever, looking at the sunshine, in his calm and lenient eyes. Vi knew that he was not able to see anything, the lane, the tree and even the sunshine. But she was well aware that she would find the purest and sweetest tears from his two eyes.

Vi let go of his hands. As she reached the wooden gate that divided the two houses, Vi turned back waving to him. Suddenly she remembered that he could not see her. She went into her house, got down to putting her books and copybooks in her schoolbag. Her small lips were singing for herself. She knew that there in the other house he was doing the day's routine work. He cooked his meal, tidied up his room, read books, wrote music and played the accordion. He liked to work. Every day was full for him. Vi closed her eyes and tried to walk about the room and things in order. Feeling a sudden compassion for him, she came out, and standing by the hedge, she saw him moving about the house. He sat down on the rattan chair. The accordion cuddled up to his chest then fanned out as widely as his heart!

The music was as powerful as the waterfall. She stood still there, at the gate. She didn't want to come in and disturb him, she wanted to show her respect for his working hours. Her hands gripped her chest. She had the whole summer with him. The music made her imagine the days when a gun slung over one of his shoulders and the accordion over the other, he was climbing uphill Truong Son Range.

BACK TO THEIR REGIMENT

THAI BA LOI

Thanh and Tri fall in love with May, a local guerrilla fighter who has joined their unit, which operates in an area occupied by the enemy in south Vietnam. May marries Tri but they break up soon after a child is born. After peace is restored, Thanh calls to see May.

"How in the world did you know I was here, eh?" May had asked Thanh for the umpteenth time since he arrived at the sanatorium. Every time she asked she could not hide her surprise. Her shining and candid eyes made him blush so that he dared not look straight at them.

"Our mates in the South remember you well!"

"Tell me frankly whether they are well-or ill-disposed towards me?"

"Why?"

"I have been obsessed by this thought since I left our regiment. I feel I let you down."

" But nobody thinks so, May "

The girl stared at Thanh. At last, he felt the ice was broken. He called to mind their intelligence-gathering missions, the nights when they waded across flooded fields to spy on the enemy, the rivers they crossed together on their way through the jungle... This recollection of the days and months spent together made him feel at ease, as if a burden had been lifted at last from his chest after nearly a day at the sanatorium.

" Where is your kid, May ? " Thanh asked still hesitantly. After bending her head slightly, she raised it and gazed at him :

" I have entrusted it to the care of my aunt. She's been living in the North since 1954. She will bring it here on Sundays. "

" Does Tri often call on you ? "

" He's come twice. However, after the second time I told him not to come again. "

" Why ? "

May drooped her head in her hands while Thanh stepped back, convinced that she was about to burst into tears. When she looked up, however, her eyes were sparkling and dry.

"I know why. I'm sorry if I don't answer all your questions. I hope that you and your mates will understand me.

... This conversation took place on a September afternoon in 1975. But the story I am relating began six years before.

It was in April. The scout team was returning to the regimental command post just inside the forest when the second shelling that night had just ended. Regimental commander Thach greeted his men at the door of his shelter ;

"What is the news?"

Team leader Tri reported :

"Both of the roads leading to Mot hamlet are held by the enemy — all Americans. They're posted in the bushes, despite the mosquitoes. We couldn't find the path following the dry brook recorded on the map. The grass along the brook has been mined by the guerillas. It seems that the path has not been used for a long time."

Thach shone his torch on the map. In the dim glimmer you could see his wrinkled face.

"I see. You remember how last year the ten of us managed to get the regiment all the way to Hue?"

As he spoke the commander smiled, a smile which was more mandatory than an order.

"Give us one more hour," asked Tri before leaving with his team.

The scouts were taking a rest by the shelter. Some of them were dozing with their backs leaned on a trench-wall. Tri was entering his shelter which somebody called him.

"Hi, Tri."

"Who's that?"

"It's me, Thanh."

"What's the news?"

"The village military committee has just sent us a guerilla who knows this place like the back of his hand. We have to set off while it is still dark.

"Where is the comrade?"

"In the signal shelter," Thanh answered. Then he added in a low voice "It is a woman comrade!"

"Well that'll be a change!" remarked a fighter standing beside Tri.

The woman was May.

Ten minutes later they set off. The moon had emerged from the earth mound in front of them but nobody cared. Enemy flares appeared one after the other. Thach followed upon May's heels true to his

habit of sticking with his scouts. Soon the party reached the earth mound amid the fields.

"Chief, I propose to take the path through the village to gain time," Tri said.

"Who knows the way?"

"Our sister here"

"Is it safe?"

"She says no road is safe."

Pensively Thach looked up at the sky, as he always did before arriving at a decision.

"Let's go then."

As they were approaching a knoll, Tri, who then led the party, suddenly stopped and turned round.

"Chief, the enemy are in front of us."

They turned back. "Which way shall we go now?" Thach asked.

"Brothers, both roads are under enemy control," said May, holding the rifle which Tri had given her before they set off.

"Is there any other way?"

"The only one is to wriggle past the enemy posts as quietly as we can."

"You are sure it can be done?" Thach asked, taking his pistol out of its holster.

"We guerillas can sneak through."

"We can do it as well then. But if you lure us into a trap I will kill you, understand?"

There was a silence. A look of bewilderment passed in the girl's eyes. Then, setting her face like a flint, she made a short step toward the regimental commander.

"Follow me. We'll get through."

In half an hour they slipped past two enemy posts, one puppet and one American. Never before had the regiment been on such a risky mission with their chief. They sighed with relief when at last they returned to their base at the entrance to the forest.

The forest was quiet in the dim light of dawn. By this time the noise of gunfire had died down. The twitter of birds, forgotten during the night, suddenly started up, drowning all other noises. The scouts slept in hammocks tied to cornflower trees with trunks as thick as ankles. Many of them lay awake. Normally they slept soundly after a nocturnal mission. This morning, however, nobody got up late. Tri went to the brook to wash his face. For a while he stopped on the stone bank to look at May's nylon hammock near the brook. The hammock swayed and a white face appeared. Hastily Tri turned round and looked at the shining white pebbles on the bed of the brook, with the image of the girl sitting up still

in his head. She stroked the hair on her forehead then lay down and covered herself, except her face. Timidly Tri glanced over to May. He saw a round face, thin lips and eyes that seemed to smile. Why do they say that Quang Da girls are not beautiful?

He went back to his hammock.

"Up already?" May said. All heads turned towards her "You regulars are very particular. For one, your shelters are great. Only they need so much wood. We just dig "ox-shelters", large and airy. No shelter can in fact resist a direct hit."

The men sat up. Was this lovely girl the one who led them past two enemy posts last night? Indeed May had a different look, gentle and more open — Had she really ordered everybody to crawl, to tiptoe, to lie down or to run so many times last night?

From the plain some explosions were heard, followed by gun fire. There was a commotion in the forest.

"The attack has begun!"

Since he came back from the brook, Tri had been sitting on his hammock listening to the others talk. Now he said to May:

"Why don't you stay in the army, May?"

"Time and again I have asked the village military committee but to no avail. Ask them and I'll stay."

"I'll ask Thach to write a few lines to the village military committee" Tri said to himself, thinking of the regimental commander now busy with the operations in the plain.

That day May became a member of the scout team.

"May, have you joined the army for good?" a girl asked when she went past the guerilla camp. She looked inside, blushed, smiled and went on after waving one hand. It grieved May terribly to leave her camp — such an unexpected departure at that. Although small, the camp had shared so many merry and sad stories. Too many for a small camp on the bank of river. A few bomb craters, a row of trees, two "ox-shelters", a thatched hut leaking under the rain. Her heart heavy, she did not want to go but her feet kept on moving. As the night was falling she could not stay because she had to guide her new mates across the river. She walked on thinking to the camp, not minding Tri who walked before her and now and then turned back as if to look at her and to hurry the others on. So she joined the army that night, the night when Tam Quy, deputy head of the village military committee, told a gathering of guerillas: "A regular unit has just come which does not know the lay of the land. Who volunteers to guide it tonight?" As many raised their hands,

May who sat in the last row had to stand on tiptoe to be noticed. Her chief smiled at her. And off she went. May had really joined the army that night, when Thach whipped his pistol out and threatened to shoot her should she lure the unit into a trap. "How bold I was", May thought.

When the scout team reached the river bank, Tri asked:

"Do you know the paths over there?"

"Not very well. Well enough, though. I used to go and play there in my childhood."

"Go with comrade Thanh to My-Luoc market to wait for a group of cadres. They should arrive there by twelve o'clock on their way to the front. Take them to the regimental command post. The way may not be clear between My Luoc and Giang Hoa, so you'll have to look out for the enemy on your way back. I shall wait for you tomorrow morning at the guerilla camp. Then turning to Thanh, Tri added;

"Beware of mines, Thanh!"

May and Thanh set about crossing the river. It could easily be forded in the dry season but the current was fairly swift that night, perhaps because of a big rain at the upper reaches. Thanh waded in first, raising his AK with one hand and holding May's with the other. Pebbles glided fast under their

feet as if to sweep them down. May took care to keep her AK out of the water, grasping Thanh's hand firmly with her left hand. Amid the cool of the water around them, the warmth of Thanh's hand passed into hers. Turning back, May saw Tri still looking at them, a black shadow on the whitish sand-bank. Only then did she realize that the moon had risen.

"Wait for me a little," May said when they reached the other bank.

Then she sneaked into a bush nearby and reappeared in dry grey clothes.

"Black clothes betray you under the moonlight."

After wringing her wet clothes, May wrapped them in a piece of cellophane which she shoved into her knapsack. Now they went downstream leaving their footsteps on the sand bank smoothed by the night's rain.

When they reached My Luoc, May stopped.

"Let's check whether the shore is clear. The enemy sometimes sets up ambushes in the market."

They sat by a mound behind a crumbled house. Beside it lay a partly caved-in shelter which could protect them from enemy shells — May had noticed it during her operations with the local guerillas in the

past. Peering at the market, they could only hear the crackling of a house on fire behind it.

"Life is hard for you here, isn't it?" May asked in a low voice. Thanh, who did not seem to hear her, sat still looking in front of him.

"May, is it true that our people were massacred here?"

This time May did not hear Thanh, because he also spoke in a low voice while the wind blew stronger.

About ten minutes later, May snuggled up to Thanh and said:

~ "The way must be clear. Let's enter the market."

May took the lead. They skirted a row of bamboos wrecked by shells and cautiously skirted the market which was now open ground without stalls nor people. Suddenly May stopped after hearing footsteps in front of her. Two armed men crossed in front of Thanh. He asked the third:

"Don't you belong to unit 70?"

"Who are you?" The man asked in surprise.

"We are from Unit 18"

"So you are waiting for us. How far is Glang Hoa?"

"It takes over an hour's walk and a river crossing"

"Let's go."

Only two hours later did Thanh and May reach the regimental command post with the cadres.

After crossing the river Thanh saw Tri standing in a maize field. He went on with Unit 70, leaving Tri and May near the water-edge,

"Did it go on?" Tri asked.

"Yes. But you were supposed to wait for us at the guerilla camp."

"Well... yes. But, I had a job to do here."

It was the first time May noticed Tri's embarrassment.

Before leaving the water-edge, May gave a kick which sent a flask of water glittering under the moonlight.

Then they made for the sand bank.

* * *

One evening, before the scout team went on a mission Tri asked Thanh:

"What do you think of May?"

Thanh put another log onto the fire and replied:

"She's fine. Brave and very clever."

"As a girl. I mean"

Thanh stared at Tri. He saw his friend's shining eyes but thought it was the fire.

"Why shouldn't they be feminine qualities? She's more outspoken than Northern girls. That's a good thing, if you ask me!"

Footsteps were heard. Turning back, Thanh and Tri saw May coming down the path with a handful of vegetables.

"Brothers, these are *ranh* vegetables" she said with a smile while raising the greenstuff, her face shining with sweat under the light reflected from the brook. "I found a bed of them over there — a rarity in this place."

May went to the fire and put the vegetables into a pot. The fire crackled and sent sparks all round. It was a pleasant forest evening with the breeze whispering in the tree-tops, the birds singing in the distance and a dim vapour over the brook.

May poured half the boiled water into a canteen then poured two tinsful of rice into the tin. With more dry firewood on it, the fire sent a wisp of blue smoke hovering over the three scouts. While tending the fire May spoke of her hamlet. She spoke about the 12 villagers who in 19'3 went to look for firewood, and were not seen again — until it was

learned that they had joined the liberation forces. She related her father's death. A B.40 shell forgotten by a soldier in a trench was discovered by an American raiding party who killed the old man in reprisal. She had many stories, particularly about her guerilla platoon, which she told in a lively and hurried way as if she was afraid not to finish them.

Thanh sat listening, now and then looking at May. She felt ill at ease but kept on chatting while minding the tin of boiling rice. As for Tri, he listened to the stories, now and then hurling a pebble at the brook which splattered water up to his feet, or glancing at the girl: "How on earth does she have so many stories to tell? Why is Thanh looking at her as if he wanted to swallow her?" Quietly he lay down in his hammock. That evening he ate only one bowl of rice, and then slowly walked to the brook to sit by its edge.

At dusk, when the scout team set off, Tri said to Thanh:

"May has special feelings for you, mate!"

Thanh was still bewildered when Tri got up and left. That night they surveyed a locality newly occupied by the enemy northwest of Phu Thuan market.



The summer slipped away. One gradually got used to the novelties of the battlefield. The fighting with a US marine regiment dragged on inconclusively. Enemy casualties and weapons collected were as many as in other battles but the regiment still lacked a decisive victory. Moreover, its losses increased owing mainly to enemy shellings and ambushes against supply carriers who didn't know the area — getting rice supplies through was rated higher than fighting.

Those days the scout team was based in a shelter by the foot of a hill. May led unit after unit through routes known only to herself over to the rice depots. She was also entrusted by the regiment with guiding battalion scouts in their missions. The supply parties were only at ease when they saw May with her AK marching in their lead. She was the star of the regiment.

... The scout team also suffered its toll, being the first target of enemy ambushes. In mid-rainy season Tri had only six mates left, including May — six irreplaceable ones, because no novice could do the job. Each time he sent somebody on a mission he was restless until he heard the familiar footfall and voice of his companion returning.

That night Tri could not sleep a wink. Since May set off, he was haunted by the image of the

girl with a big chignon on her nape and an AK in one hand. Why had they fired so many shells since dusk? He was most worried about the distant rifle fire. Last night Battalion Four had been ambushed but fortunately escaped unscathed. What had come of May? She was often rather reckless in venturing through ambushes despite the others' objections. Tri tossed about. A ray of moonlight shone on his hammock.

"Are you awake, Thanh?"

"Yes. I don't know why I cannot sleep."

"Do you hear the guns?"

"Yes, from Xuyen Phu, not from the rice convoy."

"So I tell myself. But I'm still worried. If anything happened to May, it would be terrible! By the way, Thanh, May has often spoken to me about you."

"Really?" There was a long silence until Thanh got up and lit one cigarette. After a puff, he said: "She likes me. But tell me frankly, Tri! You love her, don't you?"

Thanh felt Tri start. He sat up, gripping his hammock with both hands.

"Don't say that. It won't do any good for the others, all the more so since I am their leader."

"You are wrong. If you love her there is no point hiding it." However, feeling that he had gone too far Thanh dropped the subject.

Each of them returned to their personal thoughts. The enemy shelling increased along the river. A heavy one indeed. The Americans might have something in store tomorrow.

* * *

At 3:00 hours May arrived back with the supply column. This time they had reached the stores which provided more than they could carry home. At dawn the girl woke everybody up to tell her story. She had lost the way but said nothing about it until she found the right path, so as not to cause any anxiety to the detachment leader. Only on the way back did he realize her mistake and told her with a smile: "You're a clever thing, aren't you!"

Thanh stood beside May at the entrance to the shelter, listening to her and casting glances at Tri who was busy inside. The girl spoke with animation, her trousers rolled up to her knees, her clothes and hair spotted with mud.

"You'd better go and take a wash before the brook is crowded," said Thanh.



"I must look terrible, eh?" She snatched her towel from the clothes line, took a change of clothes and went down the slope. After a few paces she returned.

"Will you hook my hammock up for me? I want to sleep right after my bath."

Only after she'd gone did Tri leave the shelter. Passing in front of Thanh, he cast a defiant look at him. Thanh was bewildered. Tri had never before acted in this way.

Thanh went over to his hammock, feeling puzzled and distressed. Before they'd known May the two had been as thick as thieves. They had got to know each other on Highway 9. They parted when the regiment withdrew from Hue. Tri stayed behind with a battalion for a diversion operation. Every day Thanh was worried about Tri because from the observation post he could see that the enemy was closing in upon the battalion. After Tri had broken through the encirclement with a part of the battalion, they had met up again and been together until now. In the past, Thanh thought, everything had been fine. Tri should have kept it to himself. In the team, May was more open and responsive to Thanh than to the others, but this did not matter if Tri really loved the girl. Thanh felt that his relationship with Tri had soured somehow. He walked out of

the trench and took a deep breath of the bracing morning air in the forest.

May was coming up the slope, one arm heavy with wet clothes. Half way up, she leaned her back against a tree to recover her breath and called over to Thanh :

“ Have you hooked my hammock up for me ? ”

Thanh forced a smile, went down into the shelter, opened a small knapsack and took a hammock which he hung up in the innermost corner—the most solidly banked. Outside, May dried her clothes while singing a Northern folk-song she'd learnt—rather out of tune in many places. “ She is still care-free,” Thanh thought.

* * *

For May being with the scout team was both a difficult and exhilarating experience. Each mission brought her special joys, for instance when she remembered a track through the bombed jungle. After each successful mission she received congratulations, friendly looks and smiles. Never did she let her mates retrace their steps if the enemy had not blocked all the paths. All those living here were kind and devoted to her. Sometimes when she acted too

rashly someone gave her a good dressing-down. May felt that she liked Thanh more than the others because she could tell him all her personal worries while he always attentively listened to her. However, she knew that apart from Thanh all in the team were her friends, as dear to her fellow-guerillas.

This afternoon Tri was asked by telephone to send a reliable scout to guide the regimental deputy-commander in his inspection tour of the rice depots. Thanh was chosen.

The party set out at dusk. They included officers, quartermasters and more than one hundred soldiers to carry back the rice available, not counting the regimental deputy-commander and his staff.

After climbing a few hills and weaving their way through a cluster of enemy posts they arrived at Giang Hoa beach under the rain. Thanh easily led them to the rice depot. A sleepy man stuck his head out, stared at the regimental deputy-commander then took the supply order and drew in before flashing his torch, keeping the party outside in suspense. If the depot had rice in it they would be home soon after midnight and get some night sleep, better than a whole day's rest—a great chance indeed. The man put out his head:

“Who is in charge of this party?”

"I am," answered the regimental deputy-commander.

"Comrade, you'll have to go to Vinh Cuong. I have no more rice left. Don't hang around here, it's dangerous."

"Is there a ferry?"

"You'll have to find one yourself. My job is to supply rice, not ferries."

So saying he disappeared into his shelter and switched off his torch. Somebody snapped:

"This geezer should be sent to the front!"

Thanh saw the man leave his shelter through the back entrance and enter a villager's house.

"Where is the landing-stage?" asked the regimental deputy-commander.

"Only Unit 577 uses ferry-boats"

"Position our men. I'll go there."

It took half an hour to find the ferry-boats of Unit 577, an artillery battalion supporting the regiment. Finally the ferrymen, who were half asleep, agreed to ferry the party across the river. Thanh went first to contact the guerillas who told him that there were two ways to Vinh Cuong. The first followed a range of hills, with minefields on both sides of the track. The second followed an old lane but the guerillas couldn't tell whether the enemy had withdrawn

from it or not. Thanh chose the latter way, for it was too hazardous to lead so many men through a minefield. Arriving near a broken bridge, however, he smelt a slight whiff of cigarettes in the wind. He told the ferryman to go back and tell the others to stop. Then he crawled along the road until he saw small specks of fire in the bushes, heard people swat mosquitoes and smelt an acrid odour like burnt resin characteristic of US troops.

"What's the matter ? asked the regimental deputy-commander, when Thanh came back.

"The road is blocked by the Americans."

"Is there any other way ?"

"Let me see..."

Looking for the path at the foot of the hill, Thanh could only find an impassable swamp. Climbing the hill he was knee-deep in grass, without a clue where the mines were. Thanh stopped.

"Why don't you go on ?" asked the regimental deputy-commander who had come upon his heels.

"We're in a minefield !"

"This is no reason to stop. Go ahead, I'll follow you." Thanh had never heard an order like this. He turned round only to see that his chief was indeed on his heels. At times Thanh found himself hoping he'd step on a mine and end the agonizing fear

which was gnawing at him. But he bravely went on and led the regimental deputy-commander.

"Leave fifty men here to take rice and send the remainder to Giang Hoa for maize."

"We have just been there and have been told there is nothing to supply."

"Nonsense! I will write an order to him." The regimental deputy-commander pursed his lips but said nothing. The party did as was told.

It was nearly 3 o'clock and the rain was over when the man at Giang Hoa got the paper.

"Oh, an order!" he grumbled. "He is not my superior. Well... I suppose I'd better supply you all the same." After getting the maize, the regimental deputy-commander said to him:

"You're very lucky not to be under my command. I'll be reporting you."

When they got back to the scout team's base he said to Tri:

"Keep your eyes on your team. Thanh's morale needs a boost."

When Thanh woke up people were chatting at the entrance to the shelter. He heard his name mentioned. When he came out, only May stayed on. She gave him a cold look then turned her head and spoke aside after a while:

"A boy who is afraid of death!.."

At first, Thanh did not understand her words but he realized she was alluding to him when he remembered her look. He never forgot that look—like a pain, a punishment, a failure in his life.

... Tri and May were sitting in May's former house. Half of it had sagged under enemy shellings but one room was still intact, serving as a place for the guerillas to stop over. It was the first time she had come home since she had enlisted in the army. Tri scooped the water out of the trench in the middle of the house while May picked some sweet potato buds. This time they were not leading other units to rice depots. For two days the scout team had to borrow rice from the medical team nearby.

They sat on the threshold of the house waiting for the night to fall. From there they could see the fields extending to the river, the glittering water in the bomb-craters, the smoky clouds in the east and the flares fired by the Americans on Chop Non mountain though it was not yet dark.

"Tri, I thought that Thanh was very brave."

"He was top in the team! Hard times test a man. In any regiment there are people who are fine talkers but make themselves scarce in a tight spot."

Tri knew that Thanh was not one of them, but was in reality cautious — a quality which had saved Tri many times. He felt a small twinge of conscience when he spoke to May, but it was only like the whizz of a bullet in a big battle.

May was astounded for a while. Such a fine boy, afraid of death! It was only five or six years later that she correctly appraised Tri's words which caused her to misjudge Thanh so.

"It is already dark. Let's go."

They set off on the road once used by May when she went to Ba hamlet where her mother had a stall. In the past, it was lined with trees which gave such a cool shade that you could walk under them without a hat on. Nothing now remained apart from a few clumps of banana trees. The stall had been hit thirteen times and May's mother was killed by a splinter on the fourteenth. It was then that the girl had made up her mind to stay with the guerillas. Each time she went by she stopped to look at the foundation of the stall and her mother's grave a few steps away.

Tri followed May, behind her dangling hair and nimble legs, bare from the knee down. Again he thought of what he had said to May about Thanh but soon he forgot all about it. This was the first

time he was alone with May and he was filled with pleasant feelings.

At the river they met a squad of scouts standing on a sand bank.

"These two can go everywhere," said one of them. "However, this time you had better turn back because no ferry can cross these waters. And there are a lot of American troops at Thu Bon."

The scouts were old acquaintances who had often worked together with Tri and May. After chatting for a moment, they returned by skirting the hill-foot and reached May's house after midnight.

Although overgrown the house was cosy enough for May. The meal over, she sat on the threshold looking at the moon springing from a distant hillock—as she had done in her childhood. Now in the house which was seemingly born on the same day as herself only May was left. Her father and mother were no more, her elder sister had got married and left while her eldest brother had been fighting in Quang Ngai for the last two years without writing home. May sat still, recalling her life. If only one of her beloved would return, she would shout at the top of her voice despite the enemy shelling. At the thought she felt her eyes dimmed with tears.

Hearing someone behind her, May turned round and saw Tri coming up.

"A penny for your thoughts!" he gently asked.

"I am looking at the fields. You go and take a rest in the shelter."

Tri sat down on the threshold: May could hear his breath. They sat motionless for a long time. All of a sudden Tri grasped May's hand saying:

"May!"

Startled, May turned toward Tri:

"What is it?" She gently withdrew her hand.

"Why don't you speak?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Anything. I would like to hear your voice." It was the first time he spoke to her like this; she blushed.

Then Tri put a bit of paper in May's hand and grasped it tightly. They sat quietly until they returned to their base before dawn. May walked behind him. She had not read Tri's paper, which she still held in her hand, but she could imagine its content. And she wept on the way back.

Since the day she received the paper in which Tri frankly declared his love May felt worried. She rarely met Thanh partly because he was working with the scouts of Battalion Five to prepare a raid to re-establish contact with the plain, but mostly

because May felt he was avoiding her—having many times turned away upon seeing her. She felt that she resented what she'd said after he guided the regimental deputy commander. Once May intended to call upon Thanh but she thought better of it and turned back half-way.

Over the last four days she kept on thinking of Tri, disturbed as she was by his message. Many times she wondered whether he really loved her.—who could think of love in such a war? And she felt ashamed of herself. She couldn't bring herself to speak to Tri and blushed whenever she saw him. But her face radiated something, something which was neither fully joy nor love. Perhaps she was stirred by a new feeling.

That night May could not sleep. Tri, who had gone with the chief of staff to the plain, was due to return at dusk but was still not home, and it was nearly midnight. She was worried for him, more than usual in a similar situation. Many times she went out of the shelter, strained her eyes at the path leading to the river and pricked up her ears for the sound of footsteps up the slope. Now that she so longed for them the sound of a squirrel made her start.

Twice she mistook the footfall of a signalman repairing the line for Tri's. At dawn Tri was not yet

back. Her anxiety increased, May could not help rushing to Thanh's shelter.

"Are you up, brother Thanh?" And seeing him write something, she went on: "Isn't Tri back, brother Thanh?"

"Don't worry, Tri has just phoned that he will be back at noon after a meeting with Battalion Five."

May gave a sigh of relief. Only then did Thanh see her clearly: a gaunt face due to several sleepless nights, a hurried look still lingering as she sat, her arm leaning on the entrance to the shelter. In the dim morning light she caught sight of two sad and timid eyes, and peered at them until he cast them down. Later on, when she left the regiment, she often remembered Thanh's eyes that morning.

Returning to her trench, May did not know that it was Thanh's last morning with the scout team. That noon, when Tri asked for a man to replace a scout squad leader in Battalion Four who had been killed, Thanh volunteered to go without knowing how he could part with his small scout team, which was so dear to him.

"The day you went to the plain I longed for you throughout that night," May said to Tri when they began climbing the slope.

"Did Thanh tell you I had phoned back?"

"He only said so when I went to his trench in the morning."

"What is the use of longing? One does not die at any moment, and one's death does not matter to anybody."

May looked at Tri and smiled:

"Well, death puts an end to everything."

They went on. The forest path was unrecognizable after a B. 52 raid that noon. As the bombs had hit the path now obstructed by fallen trees Tri had to go along the spring. He had longed for a free afternoon to take a bathe and a snooze, but upon reaching the base he received an order from the scout leader telling him to report at the advance post so as to go next morning to the school of the army zone to attend a short training course. So he had no time to make preparations. This afternoon May sat mending his knapsack, torn by a shell splinter, then poured a few tinsful of rice into his supply belt. Meanwhile, the scout team cooked a farewell dinner with a fish killed in a pond where a shell had fallen last night. When Tri set off, the whole of the scout team save May had gone with the regimental commander to Mot hamlet to prepare for a dusk crossing.

‘I’ll go with you for a little while,’ said the girl.

“No, stay at home. I will go alone”, said the boy.

“No, I will accompany you as far as the foot of Hill 530.”

Looking at May’s bright and moist eyes Tri said nothing. They started when the sun shone slantingly through the shelter. May walked quietly behind Tri. Over the past few days she could not understand her own self. She had made up her mind not to love any particular boy, but to love everyone. You are still too young to be involved in a love affair. Just go on living as you did at the guerilla camp. Suddenly came the man who was silently walking in front of her now. A man with an ardent and restless life. He had nothing in particular compared to the many thousand soldiers of the regiment but he did attract her, perhaps because he had come to her and this alone made her a different girl. He did love me, she thought without bothering to know more about him. How could she break away from him, being so puzzled since the moment she received his bit of paper? Sometimes May thought of Thanh and of what she believed as his feeling but only for a while. Later on, when time went by, she realized that Tri’s remark about Thanh was not so correct, but for the time being it was only a vague feeling.

At the foot of Hill 530 they stopped.

"You had better go home, said Tri who went on after a pause: I am not sure to return to our unit after the course, May. He grasped her hand and continued: Could you forget me?"

The girl looked at him, her eyes reflecting a big tree standing on the hill slope.

"Why don't you say anything?" asked the boy shaking her hand.

May kept on looking at Tri then sank her head on his chest and he heard her throbbing heart.

"I don't make any pledge, dear! You will understand me when you return. Do you trust me? Suddenly she let go of his hand: let you go, dear..."

Thereupon she handed to him a parcel containing some packets of sweets and orange powder, then turned and walked so rapidly that he lost sight of her. She disappeared behind withered bushes hiding the forest path pockmarked with bomb and shell-craters. Tri also ran up the slope to leave the place where an instant before May had spoken to him and grasped his hand. He felt as if he had just had a dream. He stumbled over the trunks of the trees fallen on his way.

... The year 1969, the hardest year of the war, went by. As the year drew to a close the enemy

launched repeated attacks upon the liberated areas on the banks of the Thu Bon river. Rice supply routes were almost sealed. Owing to heavy casualties the regiment was hard up for a decisive victory. May became known to the whole regiment as a girl with boundless energy going nearly every night with one unit or the other. To everybody's surprise she was not hit by any bullet though she always opened the way. Everybody knew about her feelings for Tri but did not comment. They only spoke of her military feats for which they were grateful to her.

Early in 1970 the regiment had to pull out of the plain to the western districts where it could ensure its supply. However, together with some other fighters May had to cling to the tea hills to prepare the battlefield and wait for the regiment to come back again.

On the morning of the second day of the lunar year when returning to the scout base burnt by the enemy before New Year's Day, May met with a column advancing in her direction and noticed among them a middle sized and slightly humpbacked Thanh walking with his eyes cast on the bumpy road streaked with tree-roots. After crossing a stretch hit by B.52 bombs the men stopped beside the heaps of stone on the road. May also recognized the high stature of

the regimental deputy — commander behind her former scout mate.

“Thanh!” she called when the former let go his knapsack.

The man stood upright with bewildered eyes. Only a moment later did he manage to say in a calm and low voice:

“Where are you going, May? Have you got a merry New Year’s Day? I wish you a Happy New Year.”

“I am returning to the base. You have been there, haven’t you?”

Thanh was about to answer when the regimental deputy-commander came up.

“Hello comrade May! It’s a long time we haven’t met. How are you?”

“I am well, chief.”

“Do your mates fare well?”

May related what her mates had done since the regiment went to the western districts. After sitting still for a while the deputy-commander blurted out:

“Only six of you at the entrance to the forest?”

Emotion was both in his words and on his face. Indeed this man reputed as severe and self-confident had become emotional through the hardest times of



the regiment. She was told that Thanh was now in his good books and she recalled the night when Thanh guided him at the head of a rice supply party. This made blood rush to her ears.

At the order of the regimental deputy-commander to go on the men shook hands with May one after another. When Thanh put back his knapsack on his back his mates had already gone. He grasped the girl's hand.

"I must go. Remember me to our mates."

Then he rushed forward. May was dumbfounded. Only then did she realize that he wanted to hold something back from her and why he had cast his eyes on the road. Looking at Thanh walking hurriedly down the slope with Mount Ban Co over his head, she felt that no other mount was ever so green.

Since that day she had not met him for five years. This hurried walk and this green mount were the first things that crossed her mind when Thanh called at her in the sanatorium.

Late in the year, Tri returned to the regiment. He took command of an infantry company for a year. Then he was again transferred to the intelligence section. May was shifted to the logistics, working in the commissariat. In fact, she did not stay in the rear but her work brought her to the plain, the ferries across rivers, the rice caches on the sand banks.

Although living in the same regiment May and Tri rarely met with each other. They helped each other in each fight, each mission, each campaign.

... By mid-1973 the regiment decided to send May to the North to improve her health and study as well. She did not like to go while the regiment was fighting off the enemy nibbling attacks. Therefore the regimental political commissar had to order her to go.

On the eve of her departure May called at all the barracks of the regiment and units attached to it to say goodbye to them. She chatted merrily with everyone. An elderly comrade said, "You will have a good time visiting Tri's family!"

That night, however, May did not sleep a wink. Never had she wept like that, even when her mother died. She let her tears wet her towel and a flap of her hammock. At 3 o'clock she set off without informing anyone of her departure. Tri could not see her off as he was away preparing a battlefield.

* * *

This story would have ended here had not been for the changes when May returned to the North. From the first reception station, May was sent to a

hospital west of the Capital for medical treatment. Two months later, she was transferred to a sanatorium south of the Capital. Before that she had been granted four day's leave, May had an aunt, a regroup-pee from the South since 1954, who worked in Ha Tinh province — two days' drive from the hospital. She had written to her but did not get her answer. Tri's family lived only 20 kilometres from the hospital. So she intended to spend her holiday there.

At the village entrance she wanted to look herself for the house Tri had told her about many times. Instead of a path skirting a pond and a brick gate, she found a straight road lined with shady *sa cu* trees leading to the fields. It was ten years Tri had been away from home, she thought. She asked a boy about ten years old who looked curiously at her:

"Where is uncle Tri's house?"

"Go straight on, miss," replied the boy after a while. A girl was sweeping the yard.

"Is this brother Tri's house?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I belong to his unit and come from the South."

The girl let go of the broom and ran into the house:

"Mother, somebody is coming from Tri's unit!"

A woman, several children and two men rushed out, somewhat amazed at the sight of a girl.

The woman — Tri's mother — grasped May's hand :

"Please come in. Children, make some tea."

People vied with one another to inquire about Tri. May did not know whom to answer first. Her story of the hard life in the battlefield brought tears to Tri's mother's eyes :

"Poor Tri. When he was at home his brother and sister did everything for him. How can he bear all the hardship now ? Has he lost much weight ?" The mother wiped her tears away and smiled as she peered at May. May blushed, but at the same time she felt quite at home.

"Perhaps he has not yet got married", asked the mother.

May mumbled :

"Well... "

"There are some girls here but we have to wait for his return. Do you have a long leave ? Stay with us some days. Your presence really rejoices us and we feel as if he was home after ten years' absence."

"I'm sorry but I have to enter the sanatorium this evening". May did not know why she said so. She had intended to spend her holiday here.

More and more people came. She went on telling them about Tri, but never referred to her relationship with him. Although reserved, the family looked upon her as a close friend. Only Tri's sister was still doubtful and cautious.

When came the moment to part, to her surprise May found herself attached to Tri's family. The mother went with her as far as the road and said with tears in her eyes :

"Do come back to see us when you have time."

On the way to the sanatorium May felt something stirring in her womb. She wanted to shout: "Tri" and could not hold her tears. Her thoughts went to Tri to the days in the battlefield and to the house she called at this morning.

Suddenly a command-car stopped beside her. She heard someone's voice :

"Is that May?"

"Chief!" shouted May as she saw Thach's grey-ing hair out of the car.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the sanatorium."

"Get into the car and spend one day in my place. Some mates of our regiment are there on their way to the sanatorium."

At dusk, they arrived at the guest house where

Thach stayed a few days before attending a refresher course for senior officers.

It was the first time that May met Thach since the latter was assigned a division command three years ago. He wore well his years but was not so healthy as he had been in the regiment. After dinner she was called aside for a chat. She did not expect that he still paid attention to her progress. He looked at her and suddenly said:

"Do you know that Tri will come to the North?"

"No, chief."

"He will come here late this month for a course at the Military Institute."

"Really, chief?" said May, staring wide-eyed at him.

In the evening, after a pleasant chat with the mates of her regiment, she stayed late in Thach's room. Talking with her former chief, she did not hold back anything, even the fact that she was with child.

"Am I to blame, chief?" Then she burst into tears.

The fifty-year old soldier took hold of her hand. Through her tears, she saw that the man, who threatened to kill her if she lured him into an enemy ambush, was looking at her like a father. She did

not understand why he knitted the brows but felt at ease in his company

"I am at a loss what to do now," she said casting up her eyes at him.

"You two should have informed the regiment", he said "Now that you have failed to do so I will organize your wedding when Tri comes here. But you have to pledge that you will behave well and love each other for ever."

May wiped her tears away and poured tea into his cup, then told him about her love affair. At times the old soldier felt ill at ease, but he shared her happiness.



Tri walked on a canal embankment stretching as far as the eye could see. In the canal — dug when he had been away from home — the water flew slowly in the same direction. Tri's younger sister, Thai, who sent him off, had to stop now and then to wait for her brother, who took delight in beholding his native place after ten years' absence. The village road wriggling through two rows of trees, the well beside a big kapok tree truncated by a bomb, the old school, the landing stage covered with moss...

All those familiar scenes looked new to Tri. He wondered why he could visit his family in such a short time. Many times on the way home he asked himself whether he really did. Ten years had elapsed since the day he left his home for the battlefield. There the rush of work, the change of seasons, the military operations made him forget the time. Now Tri felt as if he had enlisted just a few years before.

He had only two days' leave and dined with his mother only once. Relatives flocked in all day long to ask for the news of the front and of their dear ones leaving for the front years before. Tri had to answer their questions. And when meal time came they vied with one another to invite him to come to dine with them.

He could not explain to himself why he thought of May very little since he came here. When he left his regiment he thought that this land — the South — and the people here would go with him the rest of his life. And he also thought that he would call at May in the first place. This grew dim now, although back home he heard about May's visit. Tri knew that his family had deep sympathy for her although they were not aware of the relationship between them. But he merely thought that he would call at her one day.

At the cement bridge over the canal, Thai slowed her paces to wait for Tri.

"What about your getting married, brother?" she asked. "Mother wanted to ask you but she could not."

"What do you think of it?" he said with a smile.

"It's up to you. In my opinion, you had better get married now because you will go to the battlefield again after a few years of study. You are nearly thirty. There is no problem. But you must make up your mind. Do you remember sister Tinh? Believe my words, she is waiting for you. Mother likes her very much. She got her doctor's degree last year and is now working in the provincial capital. She calls at us every time she comes home." As she spoke Thai glanced at Tri from time to time. But deep in thought he remained impassive.

"Brother," his sister suddenly asked. "What is the relationship between you and sister May who visited us the other day? I am suspicious about that!" Thereupon she smiled: "Tell me the truth. No girl would call at a boy like that!"

Tri looked at his sister and said in a hurried voice:

"No, just a friend."

Brother and sister continued walking on the canal embankment which seemed to stretch further. Tri wondered why he said so, he remembered that back in the South he had thought, and perhaps told May, that when he came here he would relate their love affair to his family — and first of all to his sister. It was one thing in the fierce battlefield and another here, and people's feelings have to change with circumstances — thus pleaded Tri for himself.

It also dawned upon him that with regard to May he felt they were bound by a new relationship which he did not wish for. Each time he thought of this his mind was not at ease.



One morning Tri called on May in the sanatorium. She received him in her ward, which her room mates discreetly left.

“How are you here, May?” asked Tri while staring at her face. She had changed quite a lot over the past four months. Her complexion became white, a bit pale. Strangely enough her alert eyes grew slow.

"I am well. Since I came here I have got only a touch of fever. I am healthy compared with my ward-mates. How long can you stay here?"

Tri sat still looking out of the window at the beds of wild flowers. May felt that he had not heard her question clearly.

"Only half a day, May". Tri said in an indifferent tone. "I cannot get a longer leave."

She looked at his mouth and her face held a suggestion of sadness. Today is Sunday — she thought. Perhaps he is busy. For the first time, however, his voice sounded hollow. In the past, she would believe all he said but now she had some misgivings about him.

Tri told May what had happened in the battlefield since her departure. She did not expect that a smart boy like him could speak so desultorily. A shudder ran through her body as if a draught had swept the ward.

"In the past everything was simple in the battlefield, but now things are different," Tri went on haltingly.

"Why so?" asked May looking into his eyes.

"I don't know why but the fact is that circumstances have changed."

May wanted to ask another question but she thought better of it when she saw Tri's elusive eyes. Then

she slipped her hands from the table to her knees and stared vacantly in the distance.

"Have you any problems here?"

She startled and forced a smile:

"No. I can live like others here."

"I'm afraid I cannot come to see you often. I'll have to study hard."

"Suit yourself! Moreover, the school is far from here. I am used to living alone here." She clutched the table to hold back her tears.

"I'll make some tea for you." May went to the next room, wiped her tears away and stayed there for a while. Then she brought a thermos flask and a tea-set to her ward.

Tri and May talked nineteen to the dozen until half a day went by. After sending him off she felt puzzled. She did not remember what he had said to her, and she only knew that she had not told him about the important matter: the foetus stirring in her womb. She did not understand either why she thought it better not to inform him as she saw him disappearing with his bike behind the trees.

Three days later, May got a letter from Tri.

It was a short letter. He wrote that both of them must improve their health and study well, calmly

review their ebullient feelings while in the battlefield. He asked May for her opinion.

After reading the letter May was puzzled. Many times she felt as if she was deceiving herself. She knew that she did that for the sake of her future baby.

However, she did not reply his letter.

Some time before her confinement, Thach's batman brought her another letter from Tri. She put it into her satchel to read it later, and sat listening to the stories told by the man. She learnt that Tri would go back to the battlefield right after the course, and that Thach had had a long talk with Tri. She felt somewhat relieved that Tri knew everything about it. But after the messenger had left, the attendants of the maternity home found her lying unconscious with Tri's letter in her hand. When she came to after an injection of camphorated oil, the old woman doctor said:

"Don't sorrow and think of your child."

May embraced her tenderly:

"He wants me to suffer and have a miscarriage, doesn't he?" Thereupon she sobbed in the doctor's arms."

May gave birth to a boy early in the year to the relief of the entire hospital. Had she not been

courageous the delivery would have been much more difficult.

Two days later, a command car pulled up in front of the hospital in the afternoon. A nurse came into her ward and told her she was called at. May tucked up her child in bed and went to the guest room. Thach and Tri were waiting for her there. Thach looked vacantly at the window, with a gentle and strange look in his face. Tri sat beside him, his head dropped, his eyes fixed at his sandals. They turned their heads on May when she entered. Thach gazed at her for a moment, perhaps because she was so thin and pale. Tri was confused and turned about a notebook in his hand.

"Sit down, May." said Thach. "Let us now talk seriously. I don't have much time as I'll leave for the battlefield tomorrow. I am no longer your chief but I still feel responsible for you. Tri has committed a mistake, a serious mistake, with regard to May! Now, make a clean breast of the whole matter!"

The moment she entered the room, May tried to compose herself but was still confused. Tri was sitting before her — the man she had loved, hoped for, got angry with and awaited, had changed a great deal. Speechless with repent, he was at a loss how to begin — a face she had never seen. She was seized with compassion. Was it because of her that a man who

had overcome many trials in the battlefield and lived such fine days now had so painful a face? This made her eyes smart.

Tri began to speak — in the same tone as in the past. At first, he apologized for the letters he had sent her. He said that his family did not agree to his taking a wife so far away (which May did not believe as she still remembered the voice and gesture of Tri's mother) He added that a girl had quietly waited for him while he had been away from home and still awaited his decision. The girl was loved by his family just as a member of it. This new circumstance was at the origin of his fault. When he met Thach and heard him speak about May, he recognized his fault. Now he understood that their past life in the battlefield was invaluable. If he could not call at May earlier it was because he had not enough courage to come by himself and had to wait for their chief. He asked May to let bygones be bygones while he stood ready to comply with her decision. At last, he hoped that they would live happy together.

When Tri stopped, May saw that sweat was beading on his brow. It was clear that though he had been prepared for it he had to muster all his strength to tell his story. A stifling silence prevailed over the room. Thach now and then glanced at May expecting a reproach to be followed by an acquiescence.

He felt that his presence would help her forgive Tri and that the couple would make it up for a better life. But May kept silent for a long time — which upset his plan.

“Well, Tri” May’s voice was low and so clear that the room seemed smaller. “It is too late now. We cannot live together as in the past. Certainly not. Forgive me for what I’ve done.”

Her voice was firm.

Tri dared not look up at her. As for Thach, he stared at her mouth — not expecting that this small mouth with even teeth could say such drastic words. But the expression of her face (and he remembered the first night she met him and pledged to guide him through two enemy posts) helped him understand what she said. And he knew that she would never change her mind “Ah, that is that!” he blurted out.

The room relapsed into silence until the driver came and told Thach and Tri that it was time for them to return to their barracks. May went back to her ward, lay down on her bed. She covered her face with her hands and tried to suppress a sob which would wake up her child. She remained in her ward the whole evening and part of the night. However, the next day she got up early, took a bath and wrote a letter to Tri:

"Brother Tri,

I'm sorry I treated you so rudely yesterday afternoon. But now with a cool head I again tell you that I cannot do otherwise. Don't get angry with me because I often ask myself: why don't I love you? Let us calmly review the past years and months. Since my mother died I have lived amid the love of my mates, first in the guerilla platoon, then in our scout team. At that time, in the finest days of my life, although I made a point of living dispassionately, I felt attracted to a man, Thanh. But I began to distrust him after he had guided the regimental deputy-commander at the head of a rice supply party and after hearing your remarks about him. Just then you came to me. How can a lonely girl like me resist the advances made by an experienced man like you? I love you with all my heart. Even now I have nothing to regret about what I said to you. We got on very well together during the hard years in the battlefield. Since I left the regiment, especially since you came here, our relationship has undergone changes. Of course, the responsibility for that lies mostly with you. You have told others that our married life would not make you happy because my character does not conform with your family's way of life, because my education leaves much to be desired, because you

have many friends... When I was about to deliver our child you told our former chief that it might not be your child. I have to take my courage in both hands to tell you all this. Try to imagine my sorrow while I was still with child — how can I forgive your words? Why then did you turn back to me yesterday afternoon? Maybe the twinges of conscience prompted you to meet chief Thach, in the hope that he would persuade me to forgive you, thus avoiding bad rumours for you in your impending promotion. I cannot forget our past lives overnight. Brother Tri, I still love you, or, to be more precise, I still keep my love for you. However, I cannot turn back to you, and I hope you will understand why... ”

May felt exhausted. She lay down in her bed and put her hand on her baby's forehead. Only two days later was the letter finished.

After her confinement and the changes in her relationship with Tri, May was terribly emaciated and needed special care. But her youth helped her stand on her feet and go ahead with her plan.

When her child began crawling and she found her aunt regrouped in the North, May decided to go to school. Many people worried about her situation. Some did not know her story and regarded her as a deserted woman. Nonetheless, May courageously

lived, notwithstanding the worries and misunderstandings about her.

Before going back to the battlefield, Tri called at her. This time she did not meet him to prevent at backlash of feeling which he might misinterpret. When he left, however, she felt melancholic as if she had lost something.

As time passed, May thought of her days in the regiment and of her native place. Since the day Thach and Tri went back to the battlefield, she did not meet any mate from her former unit. After the Ho Chi Minh campaign, May learnt that Tri had made progress in many fields. She received the news with a queer mood: half glad, half grieved, and somewhat proud. But she did not know why she was still uneasy about him.

Then on an afternoon of September, Thanh unexpectedly came to the sanatorium which May entered to treat a relapse of malaria. After that afternoon she could not sleep for many nights with her thoughts turned to her former regiment.

The second time Thanh came, they felt more at ease. He told her about the happenings in the regiment since her departure — while she rued for so many things lost during two years' absence from the unit. In his talk, Thanh avoided recalling anything

related to May and Tri and their personal story which was stirring the regiment.

"Tell me the truth! Do they speak of me in the regiment?"

"They still remember you and have a high opinion of you." And he added after a pause "However they do not understand why you are so drastic in your relationship with Tri."

"Don't they know that?"

"Chief Thach has talked about that when calling at the regiment. He said that "At first I was surprised but after due consideration I think she's got much more mature. Still many people do not understand that."

"They will, brother Thanh." May stopped for a while and then shifted to another subject "Since you came I have been very glad to learn more news about the regiment. But it is a pity you stay so far from here. So don't trouble to come to see me."

Forcing a smile, Thanh said in a sad tone:

"It depends upon me to come or not, doesn't it? But if you don't want me here I will not come."

May looked into Thanh's eyes as if to say: "No, I am very glad to be with you!"

The third time Thanh went to the sanatorium May had been transferred to another section for a

last check-up. The nurse who had met him the first time he came said to him:

"Sister May is in the building beside the well. Room 3, Bed 40."

Thanh made for the well. Unlike the first time he was now more collected.

When he reached Bed 40, May was not there. Suddenly seized with melancholy and loneliness, he realized that this sanatorium was so attached to him.

May came back, her face red and beaded with sweat. After she wiped it off, her eyes became brighter.

"Just my luck! I have been waiting for you all morning."

"What's the matter, May?"

"I want to talk with you. Let's go outside."

The two followed a lane, crushing gravel under their feet. When they arrived at a bench which still smelt of cement, May sat down first and said:

"I still rue the day I called at Tri's family. He was not back. I didn't say anything about our relationship. That was good. He made me laugh when he wrote to me that the crack in the feeling between us was partly due to that visit."

"Thach said that you stood your ground!"

"Our chief is very kind," she replied with a smile.

"However, he does not know that we did not understand each other well."

"Are you feeling better now?" asked Thanh after a silence.

"Not yet thoroughly cured but I feel quite well now."

"What about your work?"

"I am advised to carry on my study here. As for me, I think that the situation has changed with the complete liberation of my native place, so I want to go back. Even if I may not return to the regiment I can do my bit in the work there. What is your opinion? I want to ask you for your advice as I have nobody else here to turn to."

Then she looked at him inquiringly. He reflected upon what advice to give while remembering that he had met a similar look the first night he crossed the Thu Bon river with her.

"It rests upon you to decide. In my opinion you had better go back. Yes. You had better go back..."

Her eyes sparkled and her face softened. She had received the support and solace she was waiting for.

"Brother Thanh," she said, "Tell me the truth! Were you angry with me that time?"

"When?"

"When you went with the regimental deputy-commander, when I was in the regiment. Perhaps you resented me."

"O May " His voice took a grave and slow tone, "I was not angry with you. But I was sad because you did not understand me at all."

"Why don't you forget me?" she asked after a moment of hesitation.

His face turned pale then red — how red he could figure out himself. He seemed to hear her heart beat fast, craving for his answer. He realized that it was a crucial answer for both of them. After a while he mumbled :

"Don't you know, May, that our regiment has been commended as a heroic one ? "

She turned to him. It seemed that she did not heed his words but was following the smallest changes on his face until she got an answer from it. Only then did she remember what he said. In her confusion she did not see clearly Thanh sitting beside her, his face now near. Together with the past days in the regiment, he had brought her an unexpected and great piece of news. Two tears rolled down her cheeks, Why did she ask him why he didn't forget her? Why did she wait for a reply from him? He didn't come here for that. Now her confusion turned

into joy, pride and a desire to work. To be more worthy — the words are on the tip of her tongue.

“What is your plan for your child once you go back?” he asked.

“I will bring it with me, although there will be some difficulties. I will leave the day after tomorrow. There is no demurring when one's mind is made up. Let us go back for I have to make preparations.”

They returned by the lane they had taken. Only then did Thanh remember that himself had five days before going back to the place where so many good and memories during the ten-odd years of his life in the regiment were kept.

“Am I ruthless toward Tri?” May asked suddenly.

Thanh slowed his paces. A shade of sadness appeared on his face. She was still thinking of Tri, he thought.

However, she went on without waiting for his reply :

“I cannot do otherwise. Since the day I learnt that Tri took command of a regiment I have been apprehensive for him. What will he be up to? When I broke off with him I was broken-hearted but I believed I was right. I do not want my child to have an opportunist father and to misunderstand our past years.” May paused “To do one bad thing less or one good thing more requires sacrifices, doesn't it?”

Thanh felt the blood flowing in his body. This girl was truly wonderful, he thought. He did not understand her thoroughly though living near her for years. She was determined to live as she liked. What was she suffering from? He realized that it was not advisable to say anything to comfort her or even to reassure her. She would find herself her happiness.

They walked in silence on the new lane, crushing the gravel under their feet. May thought that he would go a few days after her and therefore have personal preoccupations. As for Thanh, he was wondering whether he would accompany her to the South. He did not think that she needed him — she was not a woman of that sort. However, if he arrived on time he could meet the recruits in the regiment early next month.

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